



Digital learning opens new avenues for students at WeSchool

In an interaction with Express Computer, Prof Dr Uday Salunkhe, Group Director, S P Mandali's Prin L N Welingkar Institute of Management Development and Research (WeSchool) talks about leveraging digital solutions to deal with unprecedented situations as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, and continue with online lectures

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Prof Dr Uday Salunkhe, Group Director, S P Mandali's Prin L N Welingkar Institute of Management Development and Research (WeSchool)

Which new technology implementations at WeSchool have led to excellence in learning processes for students?

To make a learning process successful on campus for a number of student batches under different programs, many non-teaching teams and teaching faculty on campus have to organise, streamline and execute processes for classroom lectures, availability of teaching faculty and offline/ e- learning resources.

Our classrooms are well equipped with Wi-Fi /internet access, Smart Digital Boards (LCD -Liquid Crystal Display) and OHP (Over head projector), adding value to classroom lectures with case studies, multimedia content and more.

We reached out to our students through digital mode. The library also known as the learning resource centre goes beyond offering physical copies of book volumes. It has subscribed to 14 databases such as EBSCO, ProQuest to name a few. These are accessible 24/7 on campus as well as online. This is particularly useful for students doing their summer internships or preparing for presentations or for final trim research projects since they can access these resources from their home/hostel at any time. The library also provides an online service to enable students to run plagiarism check for their research work.

For their academic integrity, we are also continuing with the plagiarism check for their final year project through Urkund- anti plagiarism software. All the queries are resolved through email communication.

To facilitate communication, WeSchool has an intranet platform which is used extensively by students and faculty alike. The e-learn portal provides students lecture schedules, profile information of the students, announcements, download case studies, take online MCQ type tests for continuous assessment and give feedback about various courses and faculty.

We have extended our infrastructure online making it accessible through internet from mobile smart phones, computers and laptops too.

As a step towards improving the learning experience on campus, there is an online feedback system specially designed for students. Here, the students write online feedback about faculty anonymously. An online feedback is vital especially for new teaching faculty with corporate experience. The system is mandatory and is carried in regular cycles throughout the academic year. Such processes help faculty understand student's interests and the response of the class. for example, A student may suggest more case studies to understand key lessons or respond well to gamification for understanding finance related concepts.

We inspire our students to use technology for community development through REDX WeSchool Innovation Lab . It is a vibrant ecosystem of innovation, rolling out new and innovative citizen-based technologies to create a framework that supports wide-ranging needs of urban population and corporations. Students are mentored here to go beyond known boundaries and disciplines of technology innovation for social impact.

WeSchool is perhaps among very few B-Schools to have participated and hosted the Smart India Hackathon organised by the AICTE (The All India Council for Technical Education) and MHRDM (Ministry of Human Resource Development). This provides a unique opportunity for WeSchool students to offer technology based solutions for a wide variety of problems which could have an impact on public/government as well as private sector challenges.

How can higher education institutions leverage technology for dealing with unprecedented situations like the lockdown as a result of the coronavirus outbreak ?

During a global health outbreak and lockdown, the foremost concern as an academician is the safety and well-being of the students. So as a first step, we dismissed classes on campus as per the indication from the authorities. 'As they say, a crisis is also a great opportunity and one should not lose it.' WeSchool has adopted this mind-set, while adjusting to a first time public health challenge of this magnitude.

We decided to take 'face to face' out of the equation and have put in place technology enabled interactive platforms, to promote the learning process with students. This has also enabled teaching faculty to assimilate new ways of making an impact.

With latest technologies like Cisco Webex and Zoom, and Easymeeting, professors are now able to conduct regular online lectures and student group mentoring for projects . Professors and students are steadily adapting to the video mode of lectures. Attendance is taken to ensure the lecture is attended by all students.

Opting for digital solutions has also made learning interesting and interactive. Most of these virtual classroom solutions allow for interactive work whiteboarding and taking a poll – this has enabled interactive and collaborative learning. For example faculty can conduct case study discussions or allow students to make presentations to the rest of the class.

Digital learning has opened new avenues for students, apart from regular course work to learning of newer concepts. The platforms allow student-student meetings which is an essential part of B-School pedagogy.

In the past three weeks nearly 200 lectures have been delivered through virtual platforms thereby ensuring that learning and teaching are not interrupted due to the lockdown during the Corona virus outbreak.

As far as executive and summer placement processes, we are in full swing. The only change is that we are persuading as many companies to conduct their selection processes online, without a face to face engagement. This is slightly easier for summers, as recruiters want to see the student in flesh and blood, when he/she is being hired for a full-time role.

With your focus on distance education, what have been your initiatives in this direction?

Due to geographical barriers and the high cost factor, students from smaller towns often find it difficult to attend a conventional MBA program. Hybrid programs from WeSchool overcome the boundaries of distance and cost and help students fulfill their academic ambitions.

Our initiatives have continued to deliver quality education, while providing distance learners with the flexibility they need. WeSchool's Post Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM) can be availed in the Hybrid Learning mode, which operates on a unique hybrid structure combining effective online and offline study formats to help people learn conveniently. Moreover, individuals with restricted movements due to family commitments can acquire invaluable professional learning through WeSchool's Hybrid Programs.

These programs vary in formats from classroom based, virtual, hybrid (blend of classroom and virtual learning), open programs, and customised programs best suited for private organisations for their employees. On weekends, experiential workshops are conducted on managerial skills development as well as learning takes place through a number of innovative modes like, business simulation games, movie learning sessions, industry visits etc.

Which, according to you, are the emerging technologies that will make a significant difference in the education sector in the future?

Like many essential services and industries, education is also one sector where work and learning is constant even during a pandemic outbreak. While mortar and brick institutes may face challenges, a lot depends on how the institute functions digitally.

In the future, the education sector will witness a significant growth in technologies like AR, AI, IoT, cloud computing and mobile learning. Students will have experiential learning via gaming elements from AI-AR and also will be able to access course material via mobile learning. The shift from a classroom learning to online learning will sustain the guru-shishya connect even in the face adversities.

Technology will pave way to a robust effective learning environment that is not only accessible to all but will also make a textbook concept lively with virtual games and examples.

Are there any new projects / tech implementations you are looking at in the next few years?

We are currently implementing an end to end ERP solution which will cover all aspects of the institute – student lifecycle, faculty and staff lifecycle and academic governance.

Apart from the ERP, we are building a strong business continuity plan based on technology to ensure that any situations similar to Corona outbreak and even common disruptions caused by heavy rains, etc., will not affect students learning.

The institute is also moving towards cloud which will enable students and staff to access data 24/7 and from anywhere. The cloud services would also enable students to learn emerging tech such as cognitive tech/AI, AR/VR, analytics, etc. Such virtual laboratories would foster research as well as consulting work.

There are several other ways that these platforms would be used in the near future – right from conducting interviews of incoming students or faculty or staff to guiding students who are working on corporate internships.

If you have an interesting article / experience / case study to share, please get in touch with us at editors@expresscomputeronline.com